DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 278 878 CG 019 656

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TITLE Sibling and Stepsibling Bonding in Stepfamilies.
PUB DATE Nov 86
NOTE 39p.; Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the National Council on Family Relations (Dearborn, MI, November 3-7, 1986).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adolescents; *Attachment Behavior; Children; Divorce; *Family Relationship; Family Structure; Interpersonal Relationship; Parents; *Remarriage; *Siblings; Social Theories; *Stepfamily

ABSTRACT

Bronfenbrenner's ecological model--consisting of the microsystem (setting in which the child experiences reality), the mesosystem (relationships between settings), the exosystem (situations impacting the child's development), and the larger, encompassing macrosystem--serves as the basis for a theory of sibling and stepsibling bonding. Although attention focuses on the microsystem level, the theory accounts for the mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. Mesosystem functions include quasi-kin relationships and home-"other" parents' home relationship. Exosystem influences include the legal system on custody and visitation; macrosystem influences deal with accepting or unaccepting environments. Parental divorce jeopardizes established family behavior patterns. After divorce, adjustments must be made. Because parenting under these situations will become less adequate, an opportunity exists for sibling bonds to become more intense. This theory attempts to explain the conditions under which children develop bonds with stepsiblings when their parents remarry, or conversely, why stepsibling bonding is inhibited after remarriage. How children build attachments to new stepparents and bond with the strangers who become their brothers and sisters are critical factors in the successful functioning and longevity of the remarriage. Six pages of references are provided. (ABL)

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SIBLING AND STEPSIBLING BONDING IN STEPFAMILIES

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CG 019656

Paper presented at the National Council on Family Relations
November 3-7, 1986. Dearborn, Michigan.

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SIBLING AND STEPSIBLING BONDING IN STEPFAMILIES

Introduction

One of the frequent laments of students of child development and socialization is that there are few systematic studies of sibling behavior. This lacunae is even more evident when we consider the growing phenomena of stepsibling interaction, where data is virtually nonexistent. This essay is an attempt to establish a framework within which to begin considering research in this area. It sets forth the beginnings of a theory that tries to explain the processes whereby: (a) sibling bonding is affected by the divorce and subsequent remarriage of a parent or parents, and (b) sibling bonding develops or fails to develop between previously unrelated children in a stepfamily.

My intent here is to establish the criteria for explaining how sibling bonds are formed, how they are affected by a parental decision to divorce, and how children bond with new stepsiblings upon parental remarriage. Such a conceptualization is important, for if Dunn (1983) is correct in saying that sibling connections are relevant to the development of a sense of self, an essential first step is to identify and describe the dynamics of sibling attachment--before studying the relationship between such attachment and the development of a sense of self.

Bank and Kahn (1975, 1982) are among the few contributors to the socialization literature who have focused on the sibling as socializing agent. They note, in accord with Dunn (1983), that siblings contribute to one another's identity formation. Siblings

also serve as defenders/protectors of one another, they interpret the outside world to each other, and they teach each other about equity, coalition formation, and the processes of bargaining and negotiation. Siblings mutually regulate each other's behavior and offer direct services, such as teaching skills, serving as a buffer against parents, and lending money and other material goods (Bank & Kahn, 1975; Schvaneveldt & Ihinger, 1979).

As a sub-group within the family, siblings also help establish and maintain family norms. They are key contributors to the development of a family culture, and they help write family "history". Siblings are important to intergenerational continuity and thus have an impact on the larger kin system. In matrilineal societies for example, siblings play a key role with uncles holding a position of ultimate authority in the lives of their sister's children (Hunter College Women's Studies Collective, 1983). Sororate and Levirate custom in "primitive" societies means the replacement of a "defunct wife by her sister or other female kin" or the "inheritance of a dead man's wife by his brother or other male kin" (Stephens, 1963, p. 194). In 19th century English and American novels aunts are depicted as playing key socialization roles. (See, for example, the novels of Jane Austen, Louisa May Alcott, and Edith Wharton). Social historians also have written of the close friendships that existed between mothers and daughters, female cousins, and sisters in 19th century America. Smith-Rosenberg (1983) writes,

> ... the extended female network--a daughter's close ties

with her own sisters, cousins, and aunts--may well have permitted a diffusion and a relaxation of mother-daughter identification and so have aided a daughter in her struggle for identity and autonomy. (p. 420)

The Scheme of Things: Borrowing for Theory-Building

One cannot understand the intimate relationships between a child and his or her siblings without first understanding how the conditions surrounding the family affect interaction between siblings and define each family's particular experience (Garbarino, 1982). Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model permits an examination of both family and community factors and it was used as a guide for the present theoretical effort. The ecological model conceptualizes a "set" of interlocking social structures. The individual organism is embedded in these structures which overlap and interact, and which help explain "how the individual develops interactively with the immediate social environment and how aspects of the larger social context affect what goes on in the individual's immediate settings" (Garbarino, 1982, p. 21). Bronfenbrenner (1979) labels these structures the microsystem (the actual setting in which the child experiences reality), the mesosystem (relationships, or links between settings, i.e., microsystems) and the exosystem (situations having impact on a child's development but in which the child does not actually play a direct role). Finally, the macrosystem is the larger social structure in which the other three are embedded--the "broad ideological and institutional patterns of a particular

culture or subculture", (Garbarino, 1982, p. 24).

The theory to be developed below places siblings within this four-tiered framework. Specific dimensions of the family microsystem within which siblings, stepsiblings, and half-siblings are embedded and in which their reality is created are discussed. While the microsystem level is where most of our attention is focused, the theory also takes into account conditions in the mesosystem, exosystem and macrosystem which affect sibling bonding. Dimensions of the mesosystem that are considered important include "quasi-kin"[1] relationships, home-school relationships, and home-"other" parent's home relationships. Exosystem influences include the legal system, especially adjudication processes and norms of custody and visitation assignment while macrosystem norms and values create an accepting environment in which stepfamilies function, or an unaccepting one which brings shame and/or embarrassment to children because their (step)family is atypical.

Structural variables, however, are not sufficient to establish the elements necessary for sibling interaction. Differences in personality also play a critical role in influencing these processes (Elder, 1983). The discussion that follows is organized to integrate Bronfenbrenner's four structures within a framework that also takes into account personality influences. My goal is to specify the variables, relationships, and conditions that predict a specific set of behavioral outcomes, manifest as positive or negative sibling/stepsibling relationships.

In summary, the theory proposed here attempts to explain how and why sibling and/or stepsibling bonds develop--or fail to develop. The focus is on the formation of new bonds, as well as on delineating how established sibling bonds change under conditions of family dissolution and remarriage. The scope of the theory is limited to bonding that occurs in families which have experienced marital dissolution through divorce. Because there is reason to think that the process may be different when stepfamily formation follows the death of a parent the theoretical scope is delimited to families experiencing divorce. Lastly, while the focus of this discussion is not on the parent-child relationship, nor the stepparent-child relationship, it is obvious that parents can and do influence sibling/stepsibling bonding processes and a complete theory would include these relationships.

Sibling Bonding: Concept and Process

Bank and Kahn (1982) define the sibling bond as "a connection between the selves, at both the intimate and the public levels, of two siblings; it is a "fitting" together of two people's identities" (p. 15). Rubin (1985) writes that bonding can be a strong emotional connection, without implying intimacy. According to Turner (1970) bonds bring group members together, keep them together, and cause them to interact. A bond exists when some value of the individual is felt to be fostered by association and interaction. The benefit gained from group membership is one of the most effective bonds holding members together. Turner points out that there may also be instrumental gains from group

membership, and consequently some bonds may be based partially on instrumental considerations as well as affection. There are also bonds that develop between those who have shared an experience that left some deep impression in memory. Such experiences and impressions help shape common attitudes. The bonding process clearly fosters interdependency and shifts the focus to an emphasis on "we" and "us" rather than "you" and "I".

Bonding is a process, not a static condition, and bonds are subject to continuous change, even in established relationships (Turner 1970). Turner suggests that the study of behavior when relationships are disturbed or broken may expose ties, or bonds, that are hidden. For example, siblings who otherwise might have been observed to be competitive and distant may display cooperative, intimate behaviors after a parental divorce.

Mutual bonding does not necessarily mean that each person is tied to the other by the same kind of bond. Superior and subordinant statuses dictate different patterns of interaction, expectations, and response. Identification processes also differ, depending on status. In the case of siblings, status differences are manifest in age and sex differences, as well as socioeconomic differences when siblings/stepsiblings reside in different households. In interracial stepfamilies, racial differences among siblings may be the source of differential status (Baptiste, 1984).

According to Turner (1970) new bonds emerge and old bonds become intensified when family members are closely involved with

one another over a period of time. However, the emergence of new bonds is not automatic nor inevitable. The degree to which they appear or fail to appear is affected by the state of the initial bonds and the situation within which the relationship exists.

The privacy associated with family behavior is one situation that fosters bonding. Family behavior is characterized by its private nature and lack of formality. Turner writes, "the shared freedom to yield to impulses forbidden outside the family is a bond that develops if conditions are favorable to the family" (1970, p. 87). He sees the family as a group that is especially conducive to eliminating reserve. At the same time, within this private unit that is sheltered from the eyes of the community, there exists a degree of privacy that separates family subsystems, e.g., spouses from children and children from parents. Bank and Kahn (1982) suggest that a willingness to respect and maintain each other's privacy serves as "a powerful bond of loyalty among siblings" (p. 323).

Associated with a relaxation of reserve is a stabilization of self/other conceptualizations, (e.g., the internal "picture" (perception) we have of the traits, personalities, characteristics, etc., of ourselves and other family members). Since family interaction is not limited to only one sphere of behavior, self/other conceptualizations are developed from and apply to a whole range of activities. Thus, the range of "unhampered, unreserved emotional and behavioral expression is equally wide" (Turner, 1970, p. 86). This point becomes important

when an established family unit expands to include "new" members, such as a stepparent or stepsiblings. The addition of new siblings can be the source of a redefinition of the "self". Compared to a new stepsister or stepbrother a child can suddenly feel smarter, more attractive, more awkward, etc. than before the comparison was made.

To summarize, six key concepts specified by Turner (1970) are used to conceptualize the processes involved in sibling/stepsibling bonding: group membership, and implicitly, access to one another; shared experiences; availability of conditions that foster intimacy and privacy; interdependency; status differences; and self/other conceptualizations. In the following discussion these concepts will be more fully developed to show how sibling attachment develops or fails to develop in families.

Conditions in the Microsystem that Facilitate Bonding

It is in the microsystem that "reality" is first defined for children. That is, within the family environment children learn what constitutes effective communication, permissible limits of expressing emotions and feelings, norms of justice and fairness, and how to bargain and negotiate for what one needs or wants. That is not to say that effective communication as defined by the family is necessarily "good" communication, or that the learned negotiation skills are useful in other environments. It only means that what the child first learns in the family becomes "normal" or expected. The child must experience exchanges with

other people in other environments before the first lessons learned in the family context begin to be modified.

Many of the behaviors, attitudes, and expectations children learn in the family are learned with brothers and/or sisters. These shared experiences help to promote intimacy, and develop the self/other conceptualizations discussed earlier. Bank & Kahn (1982) propose two conditions that allow strong sibling bonds to develop: high access (or the possibility for siblings to be available to one another) and insufficient parental influence. I will discuss the consequences of the latter condition later in the chapter. These authors suggest that when other relationships are emotionally fulfilling, the sibling bond will be weak and unimportant. They note that accessibility (which depends upon age, sex, and spacing) "during the developmentally formative years is the almost routine accompaniment of an influential sib relationship" (p. 10). Thus, in order for intimacy to develop between siblings, they must first be viewed as meeting each others emotional needs, and they must have access to one another. Given high (or at least moderately high) access, a setting is created for shared experiences. Given shared experiences, intimacy will develop. Connecting these ideas with Turner's (1970) suggestion that people develop bonds because of perceived benefit of association, or some other felt value, it is proposed that:

(A) In family environments where (1) sibling access is high, (2) children share common experiences, and (3) siblings meet each other's needs, sibling bonds will be strong.

It should be clear that strong sibling bonds develop under conditions of interdependency. Tallman and Gray (1984) have included the interdependency concept in a theory of group formation and commitment. The focus of their theory is resource exchange and has been formalized to a greater extent than the previous works I have drawn from. The principles of this commitment theory can be used to explain how siblings within a family might develop strong attachments to one another. Generalizing from Tallman and Gray's (1984) ideas about group commitment to the sibling group, it is suggested that a child's reliance on siblings entails mutual dependence (dependence on another sib in the group for specific rewards), or interdependence (reliance on the group as a whole for rewards that can only be obtained by the group's collective efforts). Therefore, sibling bonding can be conceived first as a function of an individual sibling's dependencies on other sibs, and second on their dependency on the sibling group's collective rewards resulting from exchanges with others in the environment. Third, reiterating Turner's (1970) description of the family environment as one that fosters opportunities to exhibit a wide range of behaviors, emotions, and exchanges, Tallman and Gray's (1984) proposition is applied to sibling bonding. That is, the more domains of rewards that are exchanged within the sibling group, the greater the probability that sibs will be dependent on one another. Finally, the closer siblings come to equality in their dependency upon one another, the greater their commitment to the sib-system and to one

another (Tallman & Gray, 1984). Together, these ideas can be formulated into the following proposition:

(B) When children in a family must rely on one another for a variety of desired rewards, both dependency and inter-dependency within the sib-system will increase and sibling bonding will be strong.

Turner (1970) suggests that family member's self/other conceptualizations develop in a family atmosphere characterized by a freedom to express what one thinks and feels. While the freedom of expression varies between families, it nevertheless exists in families to a greater extent than is true of other groups in society. This lack of reserve within the family means that children not only develop their own identities, personalities, traits, values, etc., in a less inhibited environment, but they acquire knowledge and understanding of their brother's and sister's traits, personalities, values, and idiosyncrasies as well.

Within this relatively free environment there are a variety of conditions that foster or inhibit the development of certain personality traits. For example, one condition is the extent of competition that prevails among siblings. The family as a group has finite resources, and in some families there may be competition among children for these resources (Ross & Milgram, 1982). Children may compete with one another for parental approval or attention; they may compete for friendship among their peers; or they may compete for the last serving of cereal in the

box. Turner (1970) claims that the type and timing of parental rewards and sanctions in the allocation of resources (which fosters competition or harmony) is important in developing self/other conceptualizations. The extent to which competition over scarce resources prevails among siblings is conducive to developing expectations, personality traits, and values which are different from those in a setting in which cooperation prevails. These differences ultimately affect sibling relationships (Ihinger, 1975).

Family distribution rules that determine the allocation of scarce resources[2] are based on a variety of factors. In some families allocation is determined by age. In other families, sex may be the determining feature. And in still others, both age and sex may prevail. Merit is yet another basis for distribution. The recipient of the greater share of resources in any group is an important factor in determining status and power (Smelser, 1968). In families, the children who have the most resources will have greater status and probably greater power within the family. They are, therefore, more likely to possess what other sibs need or want. As mentioned earlier, Turner (1970) suggested that differential status dictates different patterns of interaction, expectations, and response. This means that age, sex, and birth order (status characteristics) will affect how sibs feel toward one another, nurture one another, engage in conflict with one another, cooperate with one another, etc. Status has been found to be associated with attachment. Data consistently show that

sisters feel closer to their siblings than brothers, and younger sibs feel closer to, and admire their older sibs more than is the opposite case (Adams, 1968; Bowerman & Dobash, 1974; Cicirelli, 1980; Latts, 1966). These ideas about self/other conceptualizations, distribution rules and differential status are formulated into the following proposition:

(C) In the developmental process a child's sense of "self" and his or her perceptions of siblings' "selves" are influenced by (1) the family's distribution rules, (2) the extent of cooperation or competition encouraged by parents, and (3) the status of each child within the sibling group

To summarize, it is proposed that certain conditions in the family are instrumental in establishing close sibling bonds. In an environment that necessitates siblings meet each other's needs when parents fail to meet them, siblings will increase their dependency upon one another, and consequently will be more tightly bonded. In an atmosphere of privacy, with freedom to express emotions, siblings will have greater opportunity for self-expression, a condition that can foster increased mutual understanding. This understanding leads to assessments of compatible or incompatible personalities which in turn can foster bonding between siblings. Age, sex, and birth spacing determine the degree of access siblings have to one another, and ultimately influence compatibility and shared experience. The family's distribution rules which determine how a family allocates

resources will influence sibling attachment, as will the extent of conflict/cooperation concerning resources that is tolerated or encouraged in the household. Finally, resource possession, age, sex, and birth order convey status within the sib system and status is complexly linked to the bonding process.

Other Microsystems, Mesosystems, Exosystems, and the Macrosystem

The home has been considered the primary microsystem of the child. However, after a parental divorce, a child can move between two parental households, living, in Ahrons' (1979) terms, in a "binuclear" family.[3] Two parental households can exert different influences on a child in terms of the environments they provide, especially in terms of socioeconomic differences, family customs, and child-rearing practices. If and when one or both parents remarry, a new adult enters the child's life and each stepparent may bring stepsiblings or halfsiblings into the home. These aspects of the microsystem must be taken into account when analyzing children's and sibling's behavior after divorce.

In addition to the household other microsystems such as schools, churches, and play/friendship networks are important to sibling bonding. Interest in these systems centers on the fact that throughout childhood siblings are companions in such settings. Or, if birth spacing and sex do not foster companionship, children often blaze or follow a path laid down for or by their siblings. Conversely, in some cases siblings serve as anti-role models for each other, e.g., a younger sib carves out an opposite path from that of an older brother or sister. Thus, in

extra-familial settings sibling are role models against which a child compares and measures his or her capabilities and performance, and against which he or she is measured by others.

Mesosystems provide the relationships or connections between microsystems. According to Garbarino (1982), the number and quality of connections is a measure of the richness of mesosystems for the child. A child's community connections are a function of the family's integration within the community, and associated with the extent of connectedness is the number of adults and children in the family. A child's mesosystem changes when his or her parents divorce. With divorce, mesosystem connections may either (a) divide and reduce when two parental households are established and a child lessens or even loses contact with the nonresidential parent, or (b) multiply and expand when two households are established and the child has the benefit of both networks. Expansion again occurs if one or both parents remarry. This point will be considered later when stepsibling bonding is discussed. It is conceivable that remarriage could reduce a child's mesosystem if a nonresidental parent becomes more involved with stepchildren than with his or her biological child (Furstenberg, 1981; Furstenberg, Spanier, & Rothschild, 1982).

Exosystems are community settings in which a child does not take a direct part but which nevertheless affect his or her well-being. Such settings are parental workplaces, judicial courts, community help-based programs, (such as day-care facilities, youth organizations, and counseling programs), and other community

agencies that indirectly impinge on a child's life, e.g., police, health care, and social welfare organizations. While exosystems have an impact upon children's well-being, they affect sibling relationships only indirectly. For example, courts have the power to separate siblings even though the general rule is that siblings should remain together. According to Kram & Frank (1982),

> It is now generally held that when the circumstances of the case warrant it, and the best interests of the child require it, courts will not hesitate to award custody of one or more children to one parent, and the custody of a sibling or siblings to the other. (p. 49)

The final system of the four-tiered model that Bronfenbrenner (1979) describes is the macrosystem--the laws, norms, values, and ideologies that prevail in the greater society within which the child grows and develops. There appears to be consensus between researchers who study remarriage and clinicians who counsel stepfamilies that there are few clearcut norms to guide stepfamily behavior (Cherlin, 1978). This can result in a great deal of confusion as to what behaviors are to be expected from a stepparent or stepchild. A first-married family is the ideological "model" that stepfamily members most frequently use to compare themselves with, and there is a tendency to ignore or deny the differences that exist between the two types of families (Fishman & Hamel, 1981; Jacobson, 1979; Messinger, 1976).

The macrosystem is the "general organization of the world as it is and as it might be" (Garbarino, 1982, p. 24), and it can

affect sibling relationships in many ways. Cross-culturally it determines how siblings are normatively bound to one another, if they will grow up in one another's environment after they pass the age of five or six, or whether they must avoid being alone in each other's company (Stephens, 1963). In America there are cultural norms that prescribe sibling behavior, such as the protective actions brothers take for sisters or older siblings take for younger ones. There also may be sub-cultural differences based on class, ethnicity, and race. The role that societal and cultural elements play in relationship to sibling bonding is summarized in the following premise:

(1) A variety of environments must be identified and analyzed in order to understand fully the factors influencing sibling bonding processes. These environments are characterized by four social structures, labeled the micro-, meso-, exo-, and macrosystems. The specific conditions that prevail within each of these structures are hypothesized to influence sibling bonding outcomes.

In summary, sibling relations are affected at each structural level described by Bronfenbrenner (1979)--in primary settings such as home, school, and neighborhood; in secondary settings in which parents work and play and through which they link the child to non-family settings; in community agencies and bureaucracies that impinge indirectly on children through the opportunities and services they provide for family members; and lastly by the legal,

moral, and normative systems that prescribe and proscribe behavior for those who live within a particular culture. We consider now the specific conditions within the four systems that influence sibling bonding when parents divorce.

Consequences in the Sib-system When Parents Divorce

Earlier in this essay I reported Bank and Kahn's (1982) hypothesis that inadequate parenting was a precondition for strong sibling bonds to develop. It is reasonable to assume that over the course of the childrearing years there are many ways, and many times, that parents fail to meet their children's needs. Further, it can be assumed that inadequate parenting is not conscious, intentional, malicious, or pathological in nature. Parental inadequacy may be defined most simply as situations in which one or both parents, for whatever reason, do not nurture and guide a child in ways that provide for his or her optimum development. Adequacy is a variable that changes with changing family circumstances; varying within as well as between families.

There are some family situations where intentional parental divisiveness rather than inadvertant inadequacy may interfere with the development of close relations between children. Such a situation exists when one or both parents encourage conflict between siblings, when they make invidious comparisons between children, or when they flagrantly favor one child over another. I propose that if the conditions specified in proposition (A) hold, a strong, positive relationship between siblings will develop regardless of differential treatment by a parent or parents.

Thus, the following proposition is offered.

(D) In a family environment where parenting skills and techniques are inadequate but where sibling access is high, where siblings share common experiences, and where they meet each other's needs, strong sibling bonds will develop.

Divorce is a life event that is often associated with a period of inadequate parenting. (Hetherington, Cox & Cox, 1979; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980) As parents work to resolve problems and come to some mutual understanding of their situation, children's needs may be given minimal attention. Divorce also may shatter a child's sense of reality, order, and security. Under these conditions, given the conditions of sib access and shared experiences, siblings will look to one another for need fulfillment. Bank & Kahn (1982) offer a similar proposition concerning the consequences of parental divorce:

> ...many young siblings whose parents have decided to divorce, rely heavily on one another. Afraid of taking opposite sides in a marital war, younger sibs tend to clump together in a spirit of mutual protection as contention between the parents escalates. (p. 64)

There are situations wherein sibling bonding is not enhanced by divorce. One such situation is when siblings each strongly identify with different parents, thus creating child-parent alliances rather than parent-parent and child-child alliances in the family. Another situation is where a judicial decision is

made to separate siblings, thus limiting their access to one another. A decision to award custody to one parent versus another may weaken sib bonding when siblings strongly identify with or "prefer" different parents. These latter decisions are lodged in the exosystem, but they have an impact on sibling relations.

The family microsystem is not the only system that is affected and changed by divorce. Other microsystem experiences change as well. For example, some children's self-confidence diminishes after their parents divorce which affects peer interaction and/or school performance (Guidubaldi, Cleminshaw, Perry, Nastasi & Leghtel, 1986; Rosenberg, 1965; Parish, 1981; Parish & Parish, 1983; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). When one parent leaves the family, mesosystem connections that previously were provided by two adults now are reduced. This is especially true if little contact is kept with the absent parent. Divorce is usually accompanied by lower economic status of the wife/mother (Weitzman, 1985). When mothers have custody, as happens in 90% of the cases, (Weiss, 1979), this lowered economic level is often accompanied by residential changes which means a disruption from home, neighborhood, and school, e.g., changed microsystem settings (Asher & Bloom, 1983). If custody is contested, the exosystem impacts children with a judicial decision about the most salient issue concerning children: where and with whom they will live. Finally, if divorce is a relatively uncommon behavior and/or it is negatively sanctioned in the macrosystem, children's divorce experience will be perceived as embarrassing and shameful. Since

siblings share this experience, if they also share the negative emotions resulting from a violation of macrosystem norms, divorce will serve to strengthen the bonds they feel.

Remarriage follows divorce in about 78% of all cases (Glick, 1984). In 1980, two-thirds of all remarriages experienced by children involved a previously married man. Since most remarried men have children from their previous marriage it is expected that a majority of children in stepfamilies have stepsiblings, although the exact number cannot be calculated (Bumpass, 1984). The probabilities of acquiring a half sibling born in the new marriage is associated with the age of existing children--reflecting in part the age of the parents. Bumpass (1984) estimates that about one half of the children under age five at the time of remarriage have a half sibling from the new marriage while only sixteen percent of children aged ten to thirteen gain a half-sib. These ideas about the consequences of divorce on sibling relationships are summarized in the following premises:

(2) A child's family situation following parental divorce--including economic circumstances, nonresidential parent contact and involvement, and custody disputes--impacts sibling bonding processes.

(3) As a disruptive family experience, parental divorce creates the circumstance for children to "acquire" a stepsibling or half-sibling.

The final section of this chapter discusses stepsibling relations and attempts to identify the factors that lead to the

development of close ties between stepsiblings.

Stepsibling Bonding

A fundamental assumption underlying this theory is that siblings generally feel positive about one another, despite occasional disputes, rivalries, etc. This assumption stems from the prevailing norms making affection virtually obligatory between family members. (Adams, 1968)

This assumption is important precisely because of the lack of norms surrounding stepmember behavior (Cherlin, 1978). To the extent that people in ambiguous situations or relationships generalize from norms that are appropriate in other similar situations or relationships, we may say that norms are "borrowed". (For example, the clinical literature discusses the "myth of instant love", wherein stepparents believe that because they love their new spouse they will automatically love their spouse's children (Schulman, 1972; Vister & Visher, 1978). Thus, societal norms are borrowed in the absence of norms evolving from actual stepfamily experience.) The theory assumes, then, an underlying expectation that the various children brought to the new union will be predisposed to like one another, everything else being equal. The earlier discussion specified the initial conditions that facilitate this predisposition. That is, when children are close in age, of the same sex, have mutual dependencies, and share common experiences and/or values, they will be more likely to form attachments and develop positive bonds.

Earlier it was established that bonding is facilitated when an

individual perceives some benefit gained from interaction. For example, a child may perceive as beneficial an increase in the amount of time, attention, resources or affection he or she receives from a new stepparent and/or stepsiblings. The opposite situation holds true also. When a child perceives greater cost than gain involved in interaction, interaction will be viewed less positively, or rejected entirely. Or, perceived loss of attention may be viewed as costly, inhibiting interaction. Thus, we can expect that the initial assessments children make of their potential gains and losses associated with the formation of a new family and the acquisition of new siblings will strongly influence their predisposition to like or dislike the new stepsiblings. The possible costs involved are many, but they include a perceived reduction or loss of time, attention, resources and affection from their own parent. They may have to share their friends and possessions (rooms, toys, pets) or they may have to give up these things altogether if they change residence. This situation is well illustrated by a quote from a young teenager who, three months after moving with her mother into the home of her new stepfather and stepsiblings complained, "We've had to give up everything, and they haven't even changed the kind of hair conditioner they use".

One "natural" cleavage within a new sibling group occurs when stepsiblings have different last names. In some families stepfathers legally adopt their stepchildren, thus eliminating this problem. Another solution occurs when children informally

adopt a stepfather's last name but no legal change is effected. Adopting a common last name helps to unify the stepfamily and the sibling group, making it in their eyes closer in appearance to the nuclear intact "ideal" family.

One benefit accruing from a parent's remarriage and the addition of a stepparent and stepsiblings is the expansion of a child's mesosystem. A child's familiarity with and interaction in multiple community settings can enhance his or her competencies and opportunities and expand his or her affiliative network. The more connections or links across community settings the child has, the more he or she can benefit from what the community and its citizens have to offer. The activities and associations of a stepparent and older and/or younger stepsiblings contribute to an enlarged community network.

I mention only in passing the association between socioeconomic status and mesosystem involvement. When a parent remarries across class lines, he or she provides new and different influences from the meso-, exo- and macrosystems upon his or her children. Cross-class movement associated with remarriage can have repercussions upon the new sib-system insofar as the two uniting families have different family "cultures", values, etc. that are related to social class lifestyles. In such an instance personality variables affect the bonding process, for a child's proclivity or resistance to adapt to new circumstances may influence the rate and degree of attachment that develops between new siblings. The following proposition summarizes these ideas:

(E) When stepsiblings perceive a mutual benefit of association and feel that they share equally or equitably the costs associated with their changed circumstances and their new joint living arrangements, then strong emotional bonds will develop between them.

To summarize, stepsiblings are assumed to be predisposed to like one another, all else being equal, because of the normative pressure to hold affectionate feelings for family members. This pressure is assumed to exist for acquaintances (sometimes even strangers) who become "family" via remarriage just as it does for members of first families who add family members through childbirth, adoption, or marriage (in-laws). In addition, stepsibling bonding is hypothesized to occur most rapidly under conditions of similarity (age, sex, experience, values), interdependency, perceived mutual benefit of association, few perceived personal costs, and approximate equality in relinquishing aspects of a former life style. Conversely, stepsiblings are predicted to dislike one another and not develop intimate bonds under conditions of dissimilarity, and when perceived costs of association such as loss or reduction of resources, status, etc., are perceived as exceeding the benefits of such an association.

Conclusion

This essay has employed concepts and insights from a number of scholars of child and human development to formulate a theory that seeks to explain the factors involved in sibling bonding, how

divorce affects sibling bonding, and the conditions under which stepsiblings develop positive bonds. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) conceptualization of ecosystems, Elder's (1983) call for attention to personality as well as behavior and social structure linkages, and Turner's (1970) insightful analysis of the bonding process were the starting points for establishing this theoretical framework. I have attempted to illustrate how structural factors exemplified in Bronfenbrenner's (1979) four tiered model impacts the sibling system, and how the relative privacy and intimacy of the family environment helps to develop and maintain individual member personalities, provide a background for children to learn interaction and role skills, and foster member bonding.

Parental divorce jeopardizes established family behavior patterns and meaning systems. After divorce, adjustments must be made to accommodate the loss of one or more members, the changes in interaction patterns between family members, and changed interaction patterns between the family and extended kin. It is likely that even under the best of circumstances, parenting under these conditions will become less adequate. Because of this situation, an opportunity exists for sibling bonds to become more intense and for intimacy to grow. The theoretical formulation that was presented discussed the factors that facilitate this development. The theory also attempted to explain the conditions under which children develop bonds with stepsibs when their parents remarry, or conversely, why stepsibling bonding is inhibited after remarriage. Figure 1 summarizes the assumptions,

premises, and propositions of the theory.

Figure 1 About Here

The large number of adults who end a first marriage and begin a new one are establishing a new family environment that is different in many ways from their "first" one. One of the essential differences between first and second (or subsequent) marriages is the potential power of children to enhance or destroy the new union. Children who are the biological offspring of a couple have a vested interest in its maintenance, even during the rebellious adolescent years. (During this stage of the family life cycle the child may try to establish independence from his or her parents/family, but still wishes the family to be an intact unit.) Children have little power over their biological parent's decision to divorce or to remarry. Children whose parents make such choices may wish heartily that the divorce never happened and that the new union be dissolved. At this point they have some power to accomplish the latter end. Children's individual behavior as well as sibling coalitions can disrupt and/or destroy an adult remarried relationship. Data show that remarriages with children are more vulnerable to trouble, unhappiness, and dissolution (Becker, et al, 1977; DeMaris, 1984; Pasley & Ihinger-Tallman, 1982; White & Booth, 1985). Therefore, it may be that children, and the children's subsystem within the family, i.e., the sibling system, have been raised to new importance as the effects of children's power and influence on the success and

stability of their parent's remarriage is recognized. How children build attachments to new stepparents and bond with the strangers who become their brothers and sisters thus become critical factors in the successful functioning and longevity of the new marriage.

Figure Caption

Figure 1. A Theory of Sibling Bonding: Theoretical Statements

ASSUMPTIONS:

Over the course of the childrearing years there are many times, and many ways, that parents fail to meet their children's needs; i.e., they inadequately perform the parenting role.

Inadequate parenting is not conscious, intentional, malicious, or pathological in nature.

Siblings generally feel positive about one another depite occasional disputes, rivalries, etc.

PREMISES:

A variety of environments must be identified and analyzed in order to understand fully the factors influencing sibling and stepsibling bonding processes. These environments are characterized by four social structures labeled the micro-, meso-, exo-, and macrosystems. The specific conditions that prevail within each of these structures are hypothesized to influence sibling bonding outcomes.

A child's family situation following parental divorce--including economic circumstances, nonresidential parent contact and involvement, and custody disputes--impacts sibling bonding processes.

As a disruptive family experience, parental divorce creates the circumstance for children to acquire a stepsibling or half-sibling.

PROPOSITIONS:

In family environments where (1) sibling access is high, (2) children share common experiences, and (3) siblings meet each other's needs, sibling bonds will be strong.

When children in a family rely on one another for a variety of desired rewards, both dependency and interdependency within the sib-system will increase and sibling bonding will be strong.

In the developmental process a child's sense of "self" and his or her perceptions of siblings' "selves" are influenced by (1) the family's distribution rules, (2) the extent of cooperation or competition encouraged by parents, and (3) the status of each child within the sibling group.

In a family environment where parenting skills and techniques are inadequate but where sibling access is high, where siblings share common experiences, and where they meet each

Figure 1. (continued)

other's needs, strong sibling bonds will develop.

When stepsiblings perceive a mutual benefit of association and feel that they share equally or equitably the costs associated with their changed circumstances and new joint living arrangements, then strong emotional bonds will develop between them.

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